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SUBJECT: EMBASSY BOGOTA WOMAN OF COURAGE NOMINATION

SUMMARY

11. Embassy Bogota nominates Claudia Maria Mejia Duque, Executive Director and co-founder of women's rights NGO Sisma Mujer, for the Secretary of State's Award for International Women of Courage (IWOC). Mejia's organization has empowered women to address and overcome the impact of sexual violence, encouraged victims to prosecute cases, altered judicial system treatment of sexual violence cases, championed the government's adoption of a women's violence law, and increased awareness of sexual violence as a tool of war among human rights activists. End Summary.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS NGO MAKES A DIFFERENCE

12. Embassy Bogota nominates Claudia Maria Mejia Duque for the IWOC Award. In 1998, Mejia and four co-founders started Sisma Mujer, a women's rights NGO that focuses on the effects of the Colombian conflict on the lives of women. Sisma Mujer has grown to 25 lawyers, psychologists, and political scientists on staff. The organization seeks to eradicate violence against women in families, communities, and the internal armed conflict through protecting victims' rights, promoting women's political participation, and changing Colombia's legal and judicial culture. Mejia is the only co-founder who remains associated with Sisma Mujer; she serves as Executive Director.

SUPPORT TO VICTIMS

13. "Colombia has been in conflict my entire life," said Mejia, "and women -- especially the poor and members of racial minorities

like the indigenous and Afro-Colombians -- are the most vulnerable." Mejia notes that as part of Colombia's Justice and Peace Process, demobilized paramilitary leaders have confessed to homicides, massacres, torture, and other crimes, yet almost none have confessed to rape. Victims themselves have been traditionally reluctant to decry rape due to societal stigmatization. According to Mejia, sexual violence is the only common human rights violation in Colombia for which victims feel guilt and blame.

¶4. Mejia and Sisma Mujer are changing that culture of shame. Sisma Mujer's support groups for rape victims provide psychological assistance to women and empower them to take civic leadership roles in their communities. However, says Mejia, an unexpected consequence of support group participation and its resulting empowerment is that victims who were formerly unwilling to prosecute will often decide to pursue legal action. Victims make this decision in spite of intimate familiarity with the judicial obstacles and societal pressures faced by their fellow support group participants who have already initiated legal proceedings. According to Mejia, many victims turn to the courts not for retribution or reparation, but because they hope their actions will prevent more victims.

¶5. Sisma Mujer has had some breakthrough cases that Mejia believes will establish precedent for future victims who must work their way

through Colombia's ponderous judicial system. These cases are grim, and the resulting successes are measured, but the victims now feel empowered and are encouraged by a belief that their struggle will positively impact the lives of other women. In one case, a 14 year-old girl was enslaved for five years by a paramilitary member whose actions were facilitated by other illegal actors. Through long negotiations, the presentation of copious evidence, and sharing international case studies, Mejia and other lawyers at Sisma Mujer convinced the prosecutor to prosecute all the individuals who enabled the sexual enslavement, not just the one man who raped the victim. The trial, with multiple defendants, is expected to begin soon.

¶6. In another case, the prosecutor refused to investigate the rape of a 14 year-old displaced Afro-Colombian girl, since, as the prosecutor privately told Mejia, she believed a member of that racial group would have provoked the sexual contact. Sisma Mujer, in collaboration with two human rights NGOs, took the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) which determined the GOC had failed to protect the victim. Sisma Mujer is currently in negotiation with the GOC to determine appropriate reparation for the victim.

¶7. Eleven years ago when she started Sisma Mujer, Mejia could rarely get victims to pursue legal action; now she says Sisma Mujer cannot meet the demand for legal assistance. Prosecutors now frequently refer rape victims to Sisma Mujer -- a testament to the organization's success in improving awareness within the judicial system about sexual violence. Sisma Mujer has also broadened the understanding that human rights violations include sexual violence -- and prominent Colombian human rights NGOs now seek to partner with Sisma Mujer on sexual violence cases to be presented in international courts.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

¶8. Mejia and Sisma Mujer played a leadership role -- through drafting legislation and lobbying members of Congress -- in the

GOC's adoption of a women's violence law, Law 1257 of 2008. But Mejia insists her work training local women politicians from all political parties will have a more profound impact on Colombia's political future. In the last local elections, 30 percent of female politicians trained by Sisma Mujer won. "These women focus on basic values, and incorporate women's issues into all aspects of their political platforms," says Mejia, "and we find they are less susceptible to corruption and more likely to govern with the interest of the local population in mind."

NOMINEE INFORMATION

19. Ms. Mejia was notified of the nomination and is willing to accept the award if chosen.

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Job Title/Association: Executive Director, Sisma Mujer.

DOB: August 16, 1958.

Country of Birth/Citizenship: Colombia.

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NICHOLS